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The Human Ego and Its Characteristic Feature

[The following selection is taken from the fourth lecture, entitled "The Human Ego —His Freedom and Immortality," in Muhammad Iqbal's *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, ed. M. Saeed Sheikh (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan and Institute of Islamic Culture, 1989), 78–79. In this lecture, Iqbal discusses the "individuality and uniqueness of man," or the human ego, and offers his understanding of the Qur'ānic view of that ego. After stating that, according to the Qur'ān, (1) "man is the chosen of God," (2) "man, with all his faults, is meant to be a representative of God on earth," and (3) "man is the trustee of a free personality which he accepted at his peril," Iqbal, in the passage reproduced below, first cites and comments on Francis Herbert Bradley's (1846–1924) view of the ego, or the self, and then presents his own views on the subject.

The Hindu religious term *jivatma*, mentioned in the beginning of the selected passage, signifies the individual self, or the individual human soul. According to Hindu doctrine, the *jivatma*, being a resident of the phenomenal world, is marked by limitation and, therefore, lacks reality and is to be contrasted with *Paramatma*—the Divine Self, or the Divine Soul, that is without limitation and is, therefore, real. Hinduism teaches that the *jivatma* and the *Paramatma* are not opposites; rather, the same self, viewed as subject to limitation, is *jivatma* and, viewed as free from limitation, is *Paramatma*, the realization of this truth enabling one to see the *jivatma* as a manifestation of *Paramatma*. Iqbal's observation that "[Bradley's] two chapters [in his *Appearance and Reality*]. . . [are] a kind of modern Upanishad on the unreality of the *jivatma*"—bears on the concept of *jivatma* taken as the limited individual self; in making this observation, Iqbal is not concerned with the notion of the *jivatma* being the *Paramatma* under a certain aspect or with the possibility of the *jivatma* becoming the *Paramatma* by shedding its limitation.

The two chapters of Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* to which Iqbal refers are 9, "The Meaning of Self," and 10, "The Reality of Self." In the former, Bradley examines, and rejects as unsatisfactory, several possible ways in which "self" may be understood, and concludes: "Self has turned out to mean so many things, to mean them so ambiguously, and to be so wavering in its applications, that we do not feel encouraged" (*Appearance and Reality*, 9th corrected impression [Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930], 87). In the latter chapter, Bradley declares at the outset: "Naturally the self is a fact, to some extent and in some sense; and this, of course, is not the issue. The question is whether the self in any of its meanings can, as such, be real" (89). Again: "That selves exist, and are identical in some sense, is indubitable. But the doubt is whether their sameness, as we apprehend it, is really intelligible, and whether it can be true in the character in which it comes to us" (*ibid.*). Bradley's distinction between self being a fact and self lacking reality calls for a comment, especially because, in the following passage, Iqbal's terse phrasing of Bradley's position may cause misunderstanding. In Bradley, appearance and reality are not binary terms. When he calls something an appearance, Bradley does not imply that it belongs in the realm of fantasy and has no share at all in reality. In Bradleian terminology, anything that gets less than a perfect score on the scale of reality would be called an appearance. As Garrett L. Vander Veer says: "[T]o be an appearance, it is not necessary that something actually appear to someone in perception or that someone judge it to be an appearance. It simply must have such a character that when reflected on it is seen to be not fully real. Therefore, 'appearance' is a dispositional term" (Bradley's *Metaphysics and the Self* [New Haven: Yale University Press,

1970], 115). Bradley's theory of degrees of truth is relevant at this point. Vander Veer writes, quoting from Bradley's *Appearance and Reality* (AR):

Bradley states, "in a word, appearances are the stuff of which the Universe is made" (AR, 511). Thus, all appearances must belong to reality in some sense, for they have a "positive character" and have "no place in which to live except reality" (AR, 114). Reality is all-inclusive. Yet, it is also true that in calling something an appearance we distinguish it from reality and imply that, as such, it cannot be true or reality.

Once again we need the notion of degree. An appearance belongs to reality in the sense that it expresses the nature of the real to some degree; however, as an appearance, it cannot hold of reality without qualification. (Bradley's Metaphysics and the Self, 117-118)

Sushil Kumar Saxena sums up Bradley's view well: "Contrasted with the Absolute, everything is unreal. Yet nothing is wholly so. Everything partakes of Reality. Did it not, it would merely lie outside of, and so delimit Reality" (Studies in the Metaphysics of Bradley [London: George Allen & Unwin; New York: Humanities Press, 1967], 197). Thus, there is nothing paradoxical about Bradley affirming the self's existence but denying its reality, for Bradley only wishes to determine whether the self "supplies us with any key to the whole puzzle about reality" (90), whether it is possible to find "some special experience" (ibid.) that "will furnish us with a key to the self, and so also to the world" (93), and he answers this question in the negative.

Iqbal's comparison of Bradley's self with the Hindu jivatma shows Iqbal's sound intuition at work. Referring to Bradley, Frederick Copleston remarks: "And it is easy to understand how his philosophy has been able to arouse the interest of Indian thinkers who have not abandoned the native traditions of Hindu speculation. . . . For there is at any rate an affinity between Bradley's theory of speculation and the Indian doctrine of Maya, the phenomenal world which veils the one true reality" (The History of Philosophy, 9 vols. [New York: Doubleday/Image Books, 1994], 8:218). Saxena, cited above, is one instance of the interest of scholars of Hindu background in Bradley. In fact, in discussing the implications of Bradley's thought, Saxena makes a few comparative references to Hindu concepts (see his Studies, 190, n. 1, and 201-202, n. 1).]

In the history of modern thought it is Bradley who furnishes the best evidence for the impossibility of denying reality to the ego. In his *Ethical Studies* he assumes the reality of the self; in his *Logic* he takes it only as a working hypothesis. It is in his *Appearance and Reality* that he subjects the ego to a searching examination. Indeed, his two chapters on the meaning and reality of the self may be regarded as a kind of modern Upanishad on the unreality of the *Jivatma*. According to him, the test of reality is freedom from contradiction and since his criticism discovers the finite centre of experience to be infected with irreconcilable oppositions of change and permanence, unity and diversity, the ego is a mere illusion. Whatever may be our view of the self—feeling, self-identity, soul, will—it can be examined only by the canons of thought which in its nature is relational, and all 'relations involve contradictions'. Yet, in spite of the fact that his ruthless logic has shown the ego to be a mass of confusion, Bradley has to admit that the self must be 'in some sense real', 'in some sense an indubitable fact'. We may easily grant that the ego, in its finitude, is imperfect as a unity of life. Indeed, its nature is wholly aspiration after a unity more inclusive, more effective, more balanced, and unique. Who knows how many different kinds of environment it needs for its organization as a perfect unity? At the present stage of its organization it is unable to maintain the continuity of its tension without constant relaxation of sleep. An insignificant stimulus

may sometimes disrupt its unity and nullify it as a controlling energy. Yet, however thought may dissect and analyse, our feeling of egohood is ultimate and is powerful enough to extract from Professor Bradley the reluctant admission of its reality.

The finite centre of experience, therefore, is real, even though its reality is too profound to be intellectualized. What then is the characteristic feature of the ego? The ego reveals itself as a unity of what we call mental states. Mental states do not exist in mutual isolation. They mean and involve one another. They exist as phases of a complex whole, called mind. The organic unity, however, of these interrelated states or, let us say, events is a special kind of unity. It fundamentally differs from the unity of a material thing; for the parts of a material thing can exist in mutual isolation. Mental unity is absolutely unique. We cannot say that one of my beliefs is situated on the right or left of my other belief. Nor is it possible to say that my appreciation of the beauty of the Tāj varies with my distance from Agra. My thought of space is not spatially related to space. Indeed, the ego can think of more than one space-order. The space of waking consciousness and dream-space have no mutual relation. They do not interfere with or overlap each other. For the body there can be but a single space. The ego, therefore, is not space-bound in the sense in which the body is space-bound. Again, mental and physical events are both in time, but the time-span of the ego is fundamentally different to the time-span of the physical event. The duration of the physical event is stretched out in space as a present fact; the ego's duration is concentrated within it and linked with its present and future in a unique manner. The formation of a physical event discloses certain present marks which show that it has passed through a time-duration; but these marks are merely emblematic of its time-duration; not time-duration itself. True time-duration belongs to the ego alone.

I Toured this Garden without Stepping on the Flowers

[The following poem is taken from Part II of Muhammad Iqbal's Zabūr-i 'Ajam. Its seven verses are divisible into two parts, the first four verses, in which Iqbal talks about the world, making up one part and the last three verses, in which he talks about himself, making up the second. Verse 5 also serves as a transition between the two parts.]

Some of Iqbal's observations in this poem—namely, those about the world being misery-ridden—would, one thinks, please the Buddha. But the strong tinge of pessimism found in the poem does not represent the dominant mood of Iqbal's poetry, and the poem does not state Iqbal's philosophy of life. Rather, Iqbal is here expressing a mood of despondency that will, at times, come upon any sensitive soul as it reflects upon the stark and hard realities of life. Nevertheless, the genuineness and power of that mood are quite evident in the poem. Verse 5, which, as we said, mediates between the first and second parts of the poem, makes a significant point: Iqbal, while fully cognizant of the pain that marks life, did not allow that pain to paralyze him but made it the warp and woof of his poetry, so that his poetry is, as it were, a sublimated record of that pain (see note 5, below).]

بنگامہ اکہ بست دین بر دیر ہاپی ز ناریان اوہمہ ناندہ ہسچونای
در بنگہ فقیر و بہ کاش از امیر عنہما کہ پشت اہر جوانی کند توی
درمان کجا کہ در دہر زمان فرون شود دانش تمام حیلہ و سیرکنت و سببای
بی زور سیل کشتی آدم منی رود ہر دل حسد ارعربدہ ار دنا خدای
از من حکایت سفر زندگی میرس درنا ختم بدرد و گد شتم غزل سڑی
آسختم نفس بہ نسیم سحر کھی گشتم دین چسپن کلان ناہنا دہاپی
از کاخ و کوہ و در پستان کاخ و کوہی
کردم بحشتم ماہ تماشای این سڑی

Kulliyāt-i Iqbāl—Fārsī (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1990), 421–422

Translation

Who caused all the uproar in this ancient temple?—
For, its chord-wearing devotees are full of lament like the flute.¹

In the huts of the poor and in the mansions of the rich,
There are sorrows that would arch one's back in youth.²

Where is the cure?—for the pain gets worse with the cure;
Knowledge is but pretense, illusion, and magic.³

Without a flux of water, Adam's boat will not row—
Every heart has a thousand fights to pick with the boatman.⁴

Do not ask me to recount the journey of my life;
I reconciled myself to pain and passed on, singing lyrics.⁵

Mingling my breath with the breeze of dawn,
I toured this garden without stepping on the flowers.⁶

Detached from town and street, yet spread out in town and street—
I watched this inn with the eyes of the moon.⁷

Notes

¹Who caused . . . the flute? Who is responsible for all the tumult—the unrest, trouble, and misery—in this world, which has existed for such a long time? The verse raises a question without answering it, but the description, in religious terminology, of the world as an “ancient temple” and of the world’s inhabitants as “devotees” seems to point a finger at God, who, as the verse further implies, is the ultimate mover and shaker of the world. The “chord-wearing devotees” (*zunnāriyan* in the original) are Hindu worshippers; Hindus of higher castes wear, as a mark of religiosity, a sacred thread called *zunnar*. The question raised in the verse is not about Hinduism specifically; it is a general question, though the fact that Hinduism is the oldest of the world’s major religions makes the use of the phrase “ancient temple” quite appropriate.

Iqbal is neither raising a theological question nor making a theological statement. Many happenings in the world and many experiences of life might suggest to a sensitive mind that all is not well “in the state of Denmark,” leading such a mind to wonder about the why and wherefore of the row or tumult (*hangāmāh*) in this world. That it is the “chord-wearing devotees” who are lamenting the world’s sorry state is ironic since, not only is a temple supposed to be a quiet and serene place, but the worshippers in it are expected to believe and accept rather than question and object.

The second hemistich of the verse—*zunnāriyan-i ū hamāh nālandāh hamchū nay* (Its [the temple’s] devotees are all lamenting like the flute) powerfully resonates with the opening verse of Jalāluddīn Rūmī’s *Mathnawī* (4 vols., ed. Reynold Nicholson [Tehran: Mu’assasah-i Intishārāt-i Amīr Kabīr, 1363], 1):

Bishnav az nay chūn hikāyat mīkunad
Az judā’i-hā shikāyat mīkunad

(Listen to the reed-flute, how it tells its story—
It complains of the long-drawn separation.)

The resemblance between the images in the two verses has to be more than coincidental. The reed-flute in Rūmī’s verse complains—as we learn from the very next verse in the *Mathnawī*—because of its separation from its source, the reedbed (*nayistān*). The reed-flute stands for the human soul, which pines to reunite with its source, God, from whom it has been separated. Might Iqbal be suggesting that the devotees of God in the “ancient templ,” too, are lamenting because of their separation from God? If so, then, again, the situation is full of irony: The temple is a place where God dwells—in Islamic terminology, a place where God is worshipped is a House of God—and, surely, it is odd that a place where man is supposed to be in the presence of God should turn into a place where man is far removed from God.

The Persian phrase for “ancient temple,” *dayr-i dīr-pāy*, contains wordplay: *dayr* is “temple,” whereas *dīr-pāy* is “durable, constant.”

²In the huts . . . in youth. Misery reigns everywhere. Neither the poor in their shanties nor the rich in their palaces know true happiness; all are prey to such oppressive sorrows as would make a youth hunchbacked. The verse implies that material factors, such as wealth or poverty, do not determine human happiness or unhappiness; sorrow is built into the very scheme of worldly existence.

³Where is . . . magic? The belief that knowledge will redeem humankind, curing all ills, is false, for knowledge, too, can be deceptive and treacherous; instead of solving humanity’s problems, it may aggravate them. Iqbal’s critique is not made in absolute terms; as a distinguished scholar and intellectual, Iqbal could not be expected to deny the value of learning. Iqbal is expressing his distrust of knowledge that lacks moral vision and is pursued in disregard of nobler ends. There is no dearth of historical examples of the use of humanistic and scientific disciplines of knowledge by individuals, groups, and nations for nefarious purposes—for demeaning, exploiting, and subjugating other individuals, groups, and nations. Iqbal lived through the First World War, which shattered the complacent notion that knowledge-

based progress would liberate humankind from prejudice, put an end to deceit and tyranny, and create universal goodwill and harmony, thus ushering in utopia. Iqbal's critique, then, is aimed at knowledge that lacks a heart. Iqbal's verse reminds one of Taoism's rejection of learning and scholarship. That rejection, too, is not to be construed in absolute terms: Taoism's critique is aimed at a certain outlook—the Confucian outlook, some would say—which generates a mechanical bent of mind and a formalistic code of behavior, suppressing, or even negating, the fundamental and natural human urge for freedom and spontaneity.

⁴**Without a flux . . . the boatman.** Noticing that their boat is stalled, the passengers are in a combative mood; they suspect incompetence on the boatman's part. Little do they realize that the boat will remain stationary unless the waters provide help. The verse is a short allegory: "Adam's boat" represents the affairs of man, the "flux of water" signifies propitious external circumstances, "every heart" stands for every passenger, and "the boatman" is the agency perceived to be in charge of human destiny. Thus, the verse means that the affairs of human beings will never be in order until the root cause of the problems that are being faced are identified and addressed; too many people commit the mistake of blaming, for their lack of success, superficial or secondary causes. An obvious application of the verse is in politics: It is futile to blame the leaders of society for lack of progress or advancement if the general conditions or objective factors making progress or advancement possible are missing. The verse has an application in a theological context as well: Many people wonder why the world is, to use Shakespeare's phrase, "out of joint" and why an all-powerful God is not stepping in to set things right. Such people do not realize that God will help change things only if human beings take the initiative to change them. As Qur'an 13:11 says, "God does not alter the state of a people until it alters its own state." Thus, the basic responsibility for bringing about wholesome change in society rests with people; human effort (the "flux of water") must precede any prayers to God ("the boatman") to change society (to make the boat move). The second hemistich, with its mention of "every heart," adds point to the theological application of the verse. Often, when unexpressed in words, misgivings about Divine intention and action are harbored in the heart. Iqbal implies that many people, since dogma prevents them from verbalizing discontent with the ways of God, entertain such misgivings—or what, in a related context, Qur'an 33:10 calls *ẓunūn*, "conjectures"—about God.

⁵**Do not ask . . . singing lyrics.** If asked to relate the story of his life, Iqbal would only offer a brief statement: The one constant in my life has been pain; I have learned to live with pain, but I have sublimated that pain by lyricizing about it. In other words, Iqbal's sorrow-laden poems represent a transmutation of pain felt by him, and intelligent readers will not fail to detect the profound feeling of suffering that underlies his poetry, lending it both power and charm.

The Persian word used in the verse for "pain" is *dard*. A key word in Iqbal's poetry, *dard* denotes something like solicitous care. In Persian and Urdu usage, "to feel *dard* for someone" is to be vexed or anguished out of a deep concern for someone's well-being. Iqbal feels *dard* for the Muslim community in this sense: he is pained by the evidence of decline and disintegration visible everywhere in the Muslim world; he is hurt by the apathy of Muslims to their own condition; and he is anxious to find a cure for the backwardness and stagnation of Muslim societies. It is this *dard* that Iqbal transmutes into poetry. Iqbal's poetry made him a legend in his lifetime. But Iqbal did not want to be remembered merely as a poet; he attached much greater importance to the message than to the form of his poetry. This verse, too, implies that Iqbal's readers should, instead of merely admiring the outward aspect of his poetry, understand and appreciate the content of that poetry.

⁶**Mingling my . . . flowers.** I have lived my life in full appreciation of the finer aspects of existence. I have treated this world like a garden whose delicate beauty had to be respected. A garden receives its gentlest treatment from the dawn breeze, which reaches, touches, and caresses the flowers in the garden but without causing them any harm. I, therefore, joined my breath with the dawn breeze and roamed around in the garden, thus avoiding trampling any flowers underfoot. Iqbal is saying that he has been careful, on

the one hand, not to cause any damage to the world of physical objects and, on the other hand, not to hurt other people's feelings and sensibilities.

⁷**Detached from . . . the moon.** The moon has an entity distinct from the earth's, yet its light embraces the whole earth. It is, thus, able to maintain its independence even as it makes close contact with the earth. Iqbal's relation with the world—an "inn" (see below)—has been similar: He has lived a full life, actively participating in the affairs, on the one hand, of the Muslim community and, on the other, of the larger society of which that community is a part. But, though intimately involved in the world, Iqbal has always maintained the integrity of his personality, never compromising the orienting principles of his life. (The verse can be read as a poetic rendering of "being in the world without being of the world.") In Islamic literature, the world, a temporary abode of human beings, is often described by means of a word like "inn." The use of the word in the second hemistich provides a sort of justification for the attitude of detachment toward the world spoken of in the first hemistich: Religiously, but also philosophically, one must not attach oneself too deeply to what is transient, and, accordingly, Iqbal has never set his heart on the world, viewing it with the eyes of the moon, which is both related to the earth and isolated from it. In comparing himself to the moon, Iqbal is also suggesting that, just as the moon illuminates the earth, so his thought and his poetry have illuminated the world.

The Essence of Iqbal's Intellectual Project

[The following selection from *Zindah-Rūd (The Living Stream)*, Javid Iqbal's biography of his father, Muhammad Iqbal, offers a compact statement of Iqbal's project for rebuilding the character of the individual Muslim and reforming Muslim society.]

A study of Iqbal's writings makes it plain that, from the very outset, he had specific ideas about rebuilding the Muslim individual and Muslim society; there was, likewise, no confusion in his mind regarding the purpose of poetry. During the middle and final periods of his life, it was these ideas that he presented in greater detail in his prose and poetry. To him, the educated Muslim classes, as a whole, suffered from a conflict in thinking, or had double standards. Influenced by Western notions, these classes were secular in their everyday lifestyle, but, following convention, they also claimed to believe in Islam. In the minds of educated Muslims, faith and action had not been unified—the gap between the two had, in fact, turned into a duality, and this duality had given society a particularly bad case of hypocrisy. Iqbal wished to put an end to this duality of mind. To him, the mere promotion of a traditional interpretation of the religion would not serve to rebuild the Muslim individual and Muslim society. It was his ardent desire to have Muslim theology and law recodified in response to the needs of modern times and in light of the infinite progress that had taken place in the disciplines of knowledge. At the same time, he strove to repair the break in the intellectual continuum of Islam and knowledge in order to revive, in the true sense of the phrase, Islamic civilization. He wished that Muslim institutions would produce a mold or template of personality that would help in the formation of a genuinely Muslim

character in the present age. At all events, he felt that most of the conservative or traditionally oriented scholars and Şūfīs would find his ideas unacceptable. And yet, certain desiderata of revival made it imperative to express those ideas openly. Accordingly, on the one hand, his plan for rebuilding the Muslim individual and Muslim society consisted of thoroughly practical suggestions, and, on the other hand, he was constantly in search of that Perfect Man, or Man of Tomorrow, who would bring into existence his future ideal Muslim society.

*Javid Iqbal, Zindah-Rūd
(Lahore: Sheikh Ghulam Ali and Sons, 1979), 323
Translated by Mustansir Mir*

The Difference Between a Mathematician and a Poet

A mathematician cannot but a poet can enclose infinity in a line.

*Muhammad Iqbal, Stray Reflections, revised edition,
ed. Javid Iqbal (Lahore: Iqbal Academy Pakistan, 1992), 98*

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